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Smart Answers December 12, 2007, 11:33AM EST

For Customers, Holiday Cards or Gifts?

It's fine to send cards for your first holiday campaign. The key is to personalize them and align the message with your company's vision

by [Karen E. Klein](#)

This is our firm's first holiday season, and I'm unsure whether customers expect us to send out gifts or cards. Any advice? —K.C., Las Vegas

Marketing and customer service experts say that not only is it in good taste to acknowledge your customers at holiday time, it's also a logical way to market your firm and cement relationships into the coming year. You don't have to go crazy with expensive gifts, however, especially in your first year of business; cards containing a personal note from you are fine.

"The holidays offer small businesses a unique opportunity to not only touch base with customers, but also stand out and make a good impression heading into the following season," says [Janet Holian](#), executive vice-president and chief marketing officer at VistaPrint ([VPRT](#)). "Once you've decided that a holiday campaign is something you should embark on, the most important thing to remember is to make whatever you decide to send

out personal. Too often marketing campaigns are ineffective because they aren't targeted or geared toward a specific person. During this time of year, personalizing is vital to success."

Decide, based on your budget and your relationships with clients, what message you want to send and what will resonate most with your customers, suggests Georgette Pascale, president of Pascale Communications. "Your company approach or strategy should shine through with what you choose to do, whether holiday gifts or cards. For example, don't try to be too corporate with your images and message if that is not your [company's vision](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 12/7/07), because that might not make sense to your clients. Be consistent," she says.

If Possible, Use Your Own Products

How much and what exactly you can do for your customers will depend on your cash-flow situation. "If all you can afford is a card, that is fine. If you have an especially large client that has provided you with a fair amount of business, you may want to go the extra mile for them," says Lynn Sarkany, principal at Marketfinders.

Holian agrees: "Take some time to segment your customers over the past year based on purchases and frequency. Target the ones that have done the most business with you or have indicated they are likely to return in 2008, and send those customers a small gift of some kind." The rest would get a card that includes a handwritten "thanks for doing business with us" from you. If you can reference a personal conversation in your note, that would go a long way toward being remembered and standing out from the competition.

When possible, put together small gifts using your own products or services. "A florist could put together a very small bouquet of flowers along with a holiday greeting and thank-you note. A bakery could issue a small box of cookies with a similar note," Holian says. "Not only are you conveying thanks during a holiday of giving, but also showcasing your products for future reference."

If yours is a service firm, you'll have to be creative. Pascale's firm, which does public

relations for health-care companies, is virtual and diverse in terms of employee backgrounds. She tries to reflect that in her holiday cards. "They include the company logo and are a bit on the fun side instead of being overly serious. I work closely with my graphic designer to create a different holiday card each year, and they get sent out the first week in December to all clients and to assistants and company employees that we might not have much daily contact with, but who make our lives easier," she says. "Sometimes people only send holiday cards to the CEO or president, when there are many other influential people at the company that might be important to include."

A Spur to Further Communication

If you do send gifts, you may get a handwritten or e-mailed thank-you note from your customers. "That is the perfect time to e-mail back and remind them to sign next year's letter of agreement before the end of the year," Pascale notes. "I also use that opportunity to discuss any changes to the initial PR plan that we presented in the summer months. A simple note can be the opportunity to spur further communication." Use written communications and small gifts not only at holiday time, but throughout the year to keep in touch with your customers and let them know that their business is personally important to you.

[Karen E. Klein](#) is a Los Angeles-based writer who covers entrepreneurship and small-business issues.

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